



GENERATIONS
JOHN LAWSON

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Dedication

For Jack & Portia & Eric
& the me
who came to be
in their devoted company

Generations

Table of Contents

Wow, my life, I	1
Econo Lube	2
Caving	3
The Lust for Reality and After	4
The Sea Is a Carnivore	5
Grove	6
The Proposal	7
Ode to a Cantaloupe	8
The Island	9
After	10
Aubade: For No One	11
The Theory of Sexual Reproduction	12
Conception	13
Only Child	15
Generation	16
Smile	17
Subversion on Maple Avenue	18
You & the Thunderbolt	19
Skylight	20
Climax	21
Salad	22
A Bullet Made of Water	24
Arizona	25
Patrimony	26
Meridian	27
Rites of Evening	28
Stalingrad	29
He Will Be Waking	31
Father Earth	32

5th of 8	33
Prayer of the Absent Father	34
Here and Now	35
Burying the Twins	36
Generation of the Thaw	37
How I Decided to Change Career Tracks and Become a Cow	39
Jeremiad 2: You have denied your young the infinite	41
Parisian Scene	42
If You Wish to See Me	43
Venereal	44
Incubus	45
A Burgher of Calais	46
Testament	47
Landscape with Headstone	48
Motherland	50
Review	51
Homage to Shiva	52
54th Birthday	53
Afterglow	54

Wow, my life, I

 said, & my friend
 said, what? Get
 in the car,
 now, get
 into the car
 right now,
 & drive.

for Creeley

Econo Lube

If only that afternoon at Econo Lube

if only he had settled

if only he had only sat there quietly
and waited for the men

to finish oiling his car, the tall
thick black man and the wiry white
whose oil-slick shoe soles made them move so
gingerly, like tired skaters walking, whose
ginger movements should have warned him that the world
is slippery cement—if

only he had sat in sacred silence out of doors and watched
the clouds of march
glide past in panoply of evening;

if only he had not spoken;

if only he had not spoken pleasantly, to ask
what she was reading;
if only he had seen that she
was not the slightly pretty, average woman that he took her for;

if only he had not spoken to that woman, had not asked
her: “What’s your name?”

Caving

"Hymenau! Hymen! Io! Io! Hymen! Hymenau!"

- Catullus

There yet, we're not
there yet, we're not
there yet, we're not

there. Suddenly the
strangling passage opens, empties
into soaring caverns.

A forest of stalactites
and stalagmites closes ahead
like rough, red teeth.

The drip of rain
has slicked the floor;
there is no footing anymore.

Somewhere far within the earth
a pagan madonna sobs and howls—
the wind, trapped in buried cathedrals.

The candle flicks: turn
back, turn back, and when we reach
the surface, don't you breathe

a word. Mark the entry to the place
discreetly; cover it with secret moss.

Tomorrow and tomorrow, we'll return
to worship in the wet, enclosing darkness.

The Lust for Reality and After

“For God’s sake, let’s forget
these silly frills and frips. Stand
still, you wild, you dancing thing: wipe
smile and color from your lips,
and strip, and spread your yellow
curls upon that pillow.”

But shortly, then, that stark
reality of naked limbs
akimbo in the winding dark
gives way to satiated senses that
re clothe the sprawling world:

the sleepy eyes that spy
two luminescent mountains, each
topped with a luscious cherry pie;
recumbent nostrils that flare to catch
aromas wafted from a moonlit beach.

The Sea Is a Carnivore

We stand here together, you and I, and stare
down these orange cliffs to see
the sea, its churning,
a hundred feet below.

Soon, too soon, I'll know
your boundaries, precise, so
neatly boxed and wrapped in orange
paper and blue ribbon, topped off with a bow:

the touches and the words
that please and do not please

I'll know, and acquiesce, and gently
go back, lost inside my dreaming.

But for now, we stand together, watch, below,
the driving, swirling tide
swallow and release those two black
boulders at the bottom—with what

violence it attacks, submerges, drowns,
possesses them from every side.

Grove

After the bulldozer carved this ground, the men all knew
just where they stood: the mounds of raw red earth,
the glint of sharp stones you could grab and throw

at anyone who disagreed.

But now the trees

have come among us, quietly, like women, to shade
and heal the broken soil, dropping abundant leaves and twigs
layer after layer, building the soft loam where grass can grow,

covering the sharp and hard, smoothing off rough edges,
sheltering the squirrel, the robin, and the thrush,
whispering above like tender mothers: hush.

The Proposal

Go and make a pile of heavy stones in reverent memory
of my father, who died before you
met me. Make endless
small-talk with my demented
mother through her blur. Clean up after her.

Weave of hand-plucked heather a wreath, then add a spray
of scarlet sumac pods, and carry all, tripping, up the winding path
to that high mountain field we love; and leave
that hard-won beauty there
to fade, unseen, propped against our favorite poplar.

Take a long and solitary journey to a foreign land, and never
send one memento home to me,
not a single post card, not a kiss
blown with painful longing across
Siberia's frozen tundra, past the herds of reindeer blankly staring.

Return and sell to dull-eyed strangers everything:
your precious house chockfull of curtains,
and your shining motorbike;
liquidate that rental property
you carefully invested in near Tampa.

Then and only then, I'll marry you, and we can learn
to smell each others' minds and bodies through
our velvet-striped pajamas. Joined, then, within
the stifled compass of our rankness,
may we begin at last to find
out what it means to live
up to easy promises.

Ode to a Cantaloupe (w/ Scott Andrews)

Antelope can't
elope.

The Island

Those few years of nonobligatory sex
became, in memory,
a tiny, sunny island,
lapped fondly by a vast, blue sea
that stretches all the way
to England, cold and oatmeal gray,
where boys at boarding school
must take their morning dips
under the proctor's icy supervision,
then, quick, jump out, quite
blue about the lips,
and dash to the drafty lecture hall
still shivering.

After

After the bills; after the routine work of the day;
after dinner and the dishes, aprons hung behind the swinging door;
after the kids' homework, their baths and bedside stories;
after TV; after the solitary brushing of the teeth, ablutions
while the other locks the doors, turns out the lights downstairs
and comes back up, suddenly, across a space
now mystical, unknown, each sees a lone, mysterious stranger,
eyes full of that darkness, longing, pain, the kind to whom
you'd offer, if you had it, a cup of steaming tea, a scone,
a place at your table to sit and take a breath. But there is
no cup of tea, no table. All you have, the only thing that's left
to surrender to this haunted stranger is yourself.

Aubade: For No One

Now we need not
envy any more those giants
of the ice-white screen
their misters and their mistresses.

Exhaling smoke, lascivious, we lie
and trespass at our will
the long-forbidden real estate,
violate the aromatic, sacred spaces,

laugh to think what Mom and Dad
or God would say if they could see us
naked in our crashing wave
of brocade sheets with matching comforter.

Then, like roots tight intertwined,
we dream what lips like these
would be to kiss, come fifty years:
flaccid, with no teeth behind.

So swiftly we make up our minds,
each within the iron orbit of the bone,
and wake to sunlight's steady glare
between your taupe Venetian blinds.

We yawn and stretch, kiss
one more time, then speak of where
we two can go
to dally over Benedictine
eggs and cappucino.

The Theory of Sexual Reproduction

At a distance, the collision
of two bodies, taste
of lip on lip, the tang
of two salivas, breaths exchanged,
gasping, darkly needful, probing,
moaning like a midnight wind—all
become improbable; that solid bodies
might have ever met and so
transacted, and that
the mystic third should only then
congeal and separate, unmesh
like curds from whey; and that all
then should move away, vanish
from the others' touch, remembered
only, if at all, as moods or sunbeams,
confections spun of thinnest air: this
is the stuff of childish tales
and undigested, drunken dreams:
a doodled page from a madman's notebook,
scratched upon at random, torn and tossed
into a metal basket, prison-green.

Nothing of the kind has ever happened.

Conception

You gathered with the others among the granite columns of the temple. Gradually, more and more came down: shepherds from the mountains, fisherpeople, farmers. Not one of them breathed a word, a sound. You knew what everyone knew—the odds, how long, how desperate. You waited together under the flat rock roof. No rations were provided; each day you allowed yourself a single big bite of the goat cheese you carried in your knapsack.

Outside, the days were densely overcast. Rain poured in through the open windows. Everything was damp. A smell of mold. At night, you slept on the floor in an inch, two inches of water.

Hoofbeats, at last; everyone rushed out for the command. You stood among the shifting crowd, shivering, and tried to wring the wet out of your jerkin. The commander had no word: with his baton, he pointed toward the valley, to the road beside the river.

Everyone swept forward all at once—no army, just a silent mass of bodies moving. You found yourself caught up, swept forward in the midst of them, jostled. No transport, no oxcarts, nothing. Everyone had to make it completely on their own. But many were too weak. Women and children began to fall, gasping, exhausted, and the rest of the herd trampled them.

Your own breath came in heavy pants, your body ached and finally went numb. Through sheerest luck, you didn't stumble. And when the unruly horde burst into enemy territory, archers were waiting, pikemen, cavalry. Showers of arrows fell among the crowd at random; the strongest warriors died, impaled on lances. The enemy, faceless on the hillsides, rolled boulders down. All of the weak and all of the outer ranks, unlucky, struck at random, fell in their thousands, their thousands of thousands.

But you and the others pushed on, for now you could see
the object of it all, the golden citadel.

You marched: a blur of clashing swords and javelin jabs, bodies
and pieces of bodies, a severed hand

that floated silent in the air; the crack of bone; a yell
so hopeless it awoke you.

Yet, it was you, somehow, you and you alone, who cut your way
into the courtyard, up the inner stairs,

through friend and foe to the top of that tower. And there, you
unfurled the tiny banner your mother

had knitted. You stood on the golden battlement and gazed across
the battlefield, gone suddenly silent:

out, across the fields, the deserts, the distant hills,
the universe you, and you alone, amazingly, had conquered.

Only Child
for Holly Stevens

By-
product of an
experiment gone
awry.

Why?

What god
or absence
of a god
deprives
them always
of the vision
to abort
the hopeless
mission while
they still can?

Too
late; now
here she stands.

Generation

That time, half myth and half remembered, when
she lay back, after, and, half breathless, laughed:
“This time I think we did it; I think we made one,”
he, head half buried in a foam-core pillow, wordless,
admitted, reluctant, in his secret mind, that,
though what we think we know is usually deranged
by wishing or by fear,

he, in his heart, gazing up, now, sleepless by
her sleeping, contained with her within
the infinite, impenetrable darkness of that room,
he felt it, too: a third presence with them,
room within a room, like him sleepless, tossing,
moving, gazing blind into that same and yet
a deeper darkness.

And later, finally asleep, he woke again to feel
the last, sere leaf of his own childhood,
withered, barely clinging to a brittle, yellow stalk,
tear off and blow away, driven by the wailing, aimless,
arbitrary wind straight across the black-soil plains
toward Lake Michigan.

Smile

Standing on this soft, green knoll and staring down
at the river as it winds among the trees and fields,
I can only compare it to
a smile, the way it gently curves and disappears.
And yet I know
if Yeats or Blake or Keats were standing here,
none of them would see this river smiling.

I stand here squinting to see this little river
as a great man would
till Anna rings the bell
to call me and the children and the cat for dinner.

Subversion on Maple Avenue

When the Dingles moved their chests of drawers,
their sideboard, every stick of furniture they owned,
out of their perfectly adequate suburban house onto the lawn,
the neighbors felt dismay, as if the Dingles
somehow were enacting a sly parody
of life and logic as everyone up till then had known it.

But when the neighbors heard through unofficial sources
that the Dingles had been thrown into the street
because they'd had a series of misfortunes, unforeseen expenses,
and had therefore failed to keep up with their mortgage payments,
the neighbors felt completely reassured
and once again returned in comfort to their daily business.

You & the Thunderbolt

When winter came and we started turning
the thermostat all the way down at night,
you asked me to draw a little picture.
I drew a thunderbolt across a little piece
of paper with my pen and painted it
a watercolor orange.

Now, when you wake up
at night and walk, naked, to the bathroom
through the icy house, you carry my picture
clutched in your left hand. I ask you why
you never wear that tatty bathrobe, but you say
my orange thunderbolt is all you need to make
the deep cold bearable, even the frozen
toilet-seat.

But something's eating at me,
a fear without a name. I stare out of our bedroom
window at the dark; around the globe, lightning
strikes a thousand times a second. I resolve
to paint another orange thunderbolt and hide it
somewhere safe, a lock-box, fire-proof, buried
in a drawer where you're sure to find it, just in case
anything should ever happen.

Skylight

Of course it would be square; of course
the straight lines, primly intersecting,
demarcate what is yours from mine,
what is in from all we are excluding.

The bubble-arch of curving glass is framed
in thin, blonde timber, floating through
the bland, blind plaster of the ceiling.

The room beneath is orderly and yet
disordered: an order of the arbitrary kind—

Great-grandmother's taste for quince,
but only in a pie; the proofs that Grampaw
actually deserved each penny of his millions.

Look up. Look out. The crimson clouds
of dawn are rioting and burning down
the ghetto that we've built around them.

Climax

He lay atop her
like a twisted stick washed up
on a frozen shore.

“Go on and finish,”
she said, and he said, “I did.”
But he didn’t move.

At dawn, they bickered
over soap. By dusk, they were
there: Key West and Nome.

Salad

The bowl
is over
ful of
gods

carni
val a
bun
dance:
suave
pep
per, green
and fili
greed the
lettuce,
of a
lighter green

Jolly, jolly
the red to
matoes, no
rum
ble slap
stick no no
no oe
yond the
pale or
cucumber
and onion.

The carrots
gentle orange
marks
a continuity
with the room's
decor.

some
thing will over
flow this hap
py bar
carole, this
dance
of carnage
in a bowl

to stain,
perhaps,
the wife's new table.

A Bullet Made of Water

"Shoot him 'fo' he run, now."

- Junior Walker

It was a bullet
made of water
 that coursed
straight down her cheek
 and through my chest.

I fell then
 and lay for a long time
knowing nothing. Hallucinations

 drifted through me,
happy visions, gentle sounds.

I was a fawn lying on a fragrant
 bed of pinestraw,
 nuzzled by its mother.

I was a boat of sturdy oak,
 kissed in rhythm by the frothing waves.

I was a jet so high above the earth
 I hardly seemed to move; the sun
 reflected from my polished metal.

And then I woke, the center
of a pool of blood.

I tried to move, and then I knew
how badly I was injured.

Arizona

He washed his own mouth
out with soap; he silenced himself
for many days.

For months on end, she watched
the long green shadow from her desk lamp spread
and sprout a devil's horns.

Iguanas came by night to eat the lettuce in their garden.
You could hear them out there, rustling.

Somewhere beyond the hill, a cowpoke
sat beside the embers of a campfire, whistling to the naked stars.

Downstairs, at last, too late
that night for anyone to hear,
their goldfish named Napoleon
leaped up and out and clear
to swim ecstatically forever in
the vast black ocean of thin air.

Patrimony

The father of the liberated daughter
educates her—unlike all previous generations—
educates her, yes, to understand
with what suave grace and self-assurance
she can stand
up on her own long legs
and that she never need depend
on any man
for anything
except, of course, her father.

Meridian
for Sarah Cornibe

I finally got sick of hiding.

I ordered another pina colada
and stepped into the blazing
sunshine of your outright contempt.

I felt your x-ray eyes
trying to burn through me.
The heat on my skin felt good.

I spread my beach towel on the sand
and slathered my skin with lotion.
I stretched out and basked in your fury.

I came back day after day.
Your hate was always there to greet me,
reflecting off the emerald water.

The sand radiated your heat.
Your anger almost blinded me,
so I bought a pair of sunglasses.

I built up a tan. One day,
some surfers mistook me for one of their own.
My friends tell me I look great.

In the evenings, I sit on the patio
drinking margaritas and listening to the waves,
the palm fronds' whispers in the ocean breeze.

Then I go to bed and dream
about your golden eye. I miss you.

Rites of Evening

His body, slick as a seal,
bobs among the playthings, purple
whales and yellow boats.

The washcloth's pink darts in
between the piggies.

The hair's a froth of suds where
big fingers disappear to rub-a-dub,
and then the douche of water pouring down,
lets loose an avalanche of bubbles
down the length of him.

Then the plug. He feels the tug
of water swirling in a circle
counterclockwise, north
of the equator.

When the tub is almost empty,
water comes back on, compressed

by hand, and sprays his naked skin
with stinging jets, now
warm, now chilly. He squeals each time
until I say, "just one more time."
"Mo' time, mo' time!" he always pleads
even when the last time's over.

Stalingrad

"Ad bellum purificandum!"

- Kenneth Burke

You thought you could make me spend
so much I'd eventually give up
my son, my only one, to you
and your family's sweet
mercies: After all
they did to you;
I know what they turned you into.

It's true: I started
my career too late, my fatherhood
even later. You may reduce my older,
final self to wandering destitution. But

before I'll surrender my child, I'll fight
for every inch of ground, each foot, each yard,
each alley, every rooftop; I'll ship supplies by
night across the blazing river, launch a thousand
raids—on foot, by tank, and in the sky; I'll
rally the entire nation. You may try....
Go right ahead! Consider this an invitation
to beat your head against the burning, broken stones

until your tears, your blood run dry. I'm
crying, too; I'm bleeding; there's not
one home between here and Vladivostok
that hasn't sent at least one fine young son
to war. And still they come, trudging in ragged
columns from the fields, the factories, the villages,
grimly dark against the snow, but willing
to face the brutal pounding of the cannon.

Even if every valiant one must die,
to be replaced by skinny pensioners and little boys

who in their turn will face the fire—
even if whole generations offer up their lives, to be
mourned hysterically and forever
by grandmothers, wives, and children left abandoned

I pledge you this, you bastard:
you'll never reach the Volga.

He Will Be Waking

He will be waking
now, or very soon,
the frozen prairie sun
exploding white beyond
the water tower.

The child
slips out of bed
and over rental carpet, thin and white,
to a door so light

a man
could punch right
through it with an open palm,
could almost break it down
by leaning.

The boy
fiddles with the bright
brass-painted knob before his face
and calls: "Mama. Mama. Mama."

Sunlight
through the blinds
throws bars of black
against a wall, pure white.

Father Earth

A photograph has you
sitting by me on the sofa, my arm around
your shoulder, your head pressed into my side.

I was simply there, natural as the soil
shouldering your burdens
when you laid them down. Beyond

the window, elms and hickories,
deep and thick and high,
majestically extending shade,

century after century.

But I...

I disappeared.

The last time I came to you, you ran
to me, calling, "Daddy! Daddy!" your arms
reaching up to soar.

Which visit will it be at last
when you cling to mommy's skirt and watch with wide and fearful eyes

bulldozers leveling the hardwoods, and,
through smoke of burning branches, that strange

intruder moving toward you, strangely sad?

5th of 8

Let's see: this
night, Wednesday night,
as I rock you to sleep,
is the fifth of eight.

I tried to arrive Friday
in time to see you,
but the flight was late.
Even big boys like you
have to be in bed by eight.

So: Saturday, Sunday,
Monday, Tuesday, tonight;
then tomorrow, then Friday,
and last, Saturday night.
At Sunday's first glimmer,
I'll drive to the airport.

We rock in the dark, your heavy
head on my shoulder.
The warm weight
of you rests upon me entirely.

I smell your sweet breath
and listen to it, counting:
Friday's the seventh,
tomorrow's the sixth.
Tonight, Wednesday night,
is the fifth of eight.

Prayer of the Absent Father

Comfort him, Queen; console
my little boy so far away from me. Send
your birds to flash through sunlight and to sing.
Make the wounds that others carve
into his flesh and mind
open in my body and my brain, so
he may be whole again.

Here & Now

They tell me even
if you lose
completely, even
if he's denied
to you
completely he
will someday
come to you
someday looking
for his missing
half. But I
don't believe
in there or later—
only always
here and now.

Burying the Twins

Over to the right, the trees, completely leaved,
cast deep black shadows. The grass, unruly,
still cannot conceal the truth: this ground
is rolling, broken as the sea,
as if it might reject, throw up again,
the spoiled lives of the two stillborns
furtively committed to its waves.

The man—the “owner”—drags the second toward the orange hole
while mother, who lay beside her lost ones through the night,
stands with front legs in the grave, her bovine will
to share the journey with her calves, regardless of their destination.

The tractor, gray metal, chugs its guttural satire on all things mortal
while flowers of the field, violet and yellow,
riot in their ecstasy, oblivious beneath a livid sky.

Behind this small tableau, the whole world, soiled,
ripples toward a blue horizon.

Generation of the Thaw

These you see are men of winter, women
of that god-forsaken prairie sod locked
deep in ice, lost beneath the immemorial snow:
perfection
of their kind,
they squint
harsh eyes to the horizon, though they grimly
know precisely what
of solid earth, of sky steel-blue they might
expect: no thing except
the bitter slash of falling sleet,
the prickled rime that rises in the night
to cut poor, tender feet; but

of warmth and comfort, only that small spark
that frozen hearts may strike from one another in the prairie dark.

Now the freshets liven, wake
In beds of long-forgotten streams, and out,

far out, where land rolls like a slow, slow dream
of ocean, you can spot
black soil, sodden with spring's melting, peep
skyward, through the blinding
blanket of pure white.

And these few stand in silence, walk
in their accustomed spaces, watch
but do not see, their flinty eyes attuned
to winter and the dunes of snow;
and where they go,
their children, and the children of their children's children—
none will ever follow.

How I Decided to Change Career Tracks and Become a Cow

In Illinois, the cattle in the feedlots
feed and feed out of sheer boredom.

To crunch that grain between huge molars
helps them to ignore their darkest
cow anxieties:

from overcrowding in the pens
from slipping on each others' shit with every step
from not knowing anything of what's to come, not
even that they don't know what.



Corrugated tin slaughterhouses loom in the background.

Back east in my apartment, meanwhile,
my son's small ghost declares a hunger strike. His precise
demands are vague
but firm, completely non-negotiable. He assumes
a lotus position on my bedroom floor,
refuses to speak another word.

A sudden pattering, as of rain against the window.
I throw the drapes aside, pull up the blinds,
still screaming over my shoulder, "Eat, my son, or you will die!"
Outside, dark phalanxes of wasps
throw themselves, wave after wave, against my windowpanes
as if demanding shelter.
They feel the autumn coming on, and now assert
their rights as individuals not to fall,
paralyzed by cold, and freeze there on the frosty ground.

I check my balance: a dollar ninety-five.
Frantically, I wonder how
I'll pay the next month's rent just for myself,
not to mention for my son's small ghost
and eighty thousand angry wasps.

My hard and heavy feet tread toward the door.
I'm trying to be careful, but swarms buzz up at every step
and sting me anyway.
As soon as I step outside, I slip on a pile of shit and skin my knee.
I pick myself up, begin galloping.

**Jeremiad 2: You have denied your young the infinite
for Ann Jabro and Ron Arnett**

You have denied your young the infinite
pleasure of deprivation.

Things. Things.

For you
it's always
a matter
of never
enough, and
yet, you
are never
empty.

Stick
your tongue
out after
3 days
without water:
catch one
drop
of rain;
savor of
the snow
a single
flake.

Parisian Scene

The pretty lady and her daughter
stand on the bridge. The girl is growing up. Their laughter
dances on the water. The mother
speaks of her own steps into the world:
that kiss; her silly broken heart; the boat
with that boy bending to the oars
that slid so easily across the glassy Loire.

I watch them, knowing
that my son is growing, too—too soon,
he'll ask, if only with his eyes:
What should he say? To whom? What should
he feel, and what expect?

A sudden wind sends grit and paper
swirling down the avenue.
The lady holds the wide brim of her hat
with both hands. They bend
and make their way across.

I won't know what to tell him.

If You Wish to See Me

If you wish to see me, little man,
find time in this life if you can,
and disbelieve your Christian mother:
after this life, there is no other.

Venereal

Seen from the stern, above the churning wake,
The mainland's green sinks among the waves
As Susan sank from view so very long ago.

One idly dreams from time to time
One day she'll reappear, transported, maybe,
On a magic shell, modest blonde tresses half
Hiding nipples the color of red coral.

Still, one learns to live whatever while
With what's at hand and what's at eye:

The vast horizon, so far out of reach;
The gulls that swoop and turn and cry,
Torn between temptations: the contemptible
Crumbs we toss them or the infinite sky.

Incubus

Arlene had died, apparently.

Nobody said so, but everybody at the party
was talking about her sister Ruthie,
how accomplished her Italian had become,
how cute she looked with long blonde hair,
and how she'd wowed La Scala.

Ruthie. Little Ruth. I'd never even heard her sing,
but when her mom came in, quite suddenly
the chatting people parted like the sea,
and I no longer felt my feet as they
floated me over to her side.

"So where's that frumpy little housewife I once knew?"

I said. "You must be working out. And look
at this couture dress. My God, you're gorgeous."

She nodded: "Jerry left me well provided for."

"But that's been quite a while," I said, and she said,
"Fifteen years—and each one felt like fifty."

"But are you seeing anyone," I said, "now?" She laughed.

"I tried once—got remarried; it lasted
a couple of years. Poor guy!" She laughed again.
"No man," she said, "could ever measure up to Jerry David."

I told her how great it had been to see her.

A Burgher of Calais after Rodin

The money that I made, I made
When I was young because I had an eye
For rules: which X should go with any Y
To make a Z. My playmates fantasized
Great armies in the clouds, while I
Connected all things logically;
I played the greater game; I worked my craft and duty.

But then the long years intervened;
Affairs, well started, moved apace,
And fruits of ample portions, time, and space
Piled up, drew breath, and lived, as these, my daughters,
Grown and gathered now to grieve each step, my measured pace
Toward certain death.

The conqueror claims to spare the town
If only I and these few more—the cream—
Surrender these poor bodies, thence to scream
Our lives out, flayed and knouted, dragged, then burned:
A task much easier, in its way,
Than picking out which hat or neck-ruff to adorn my aging face each
morning
Or deciding which game of cards the family and sycophants should
play
Through evenings interminably decorous. This day
I see, at last, my duty once again. Once more, my step
Rings solid on the solid earth. Unbolt the gate. I know my way.

Testament

We spoke slowly, calmly, each in turn,
In tones that grew more hushed as evening
Bunched outside the windows: how, without him, none
Would ever be the same: not cattle in the fields,
Not the spreading fields themselves, not mountains, whose
Sharp rising in the middle distance showed
Where all extension ends and, beyond,
Inscrutable beginnings.
Yet we knew
This conversation was the sort we'd learned,
Perfected in the logic of his presence, and that, so,
All would truly be the same as when he sat
Among us, howsoever radically changed:
Cattle, fields, mountains, windows, breath
Of conversation, and we, the speakers ourselves, woven
In a complex whole, embodying his resurrection and our own
Even as the tomb held fast his bones
And evening fell around us.

Landscape with Headstone

“Friend, I weep for a body.”

- Ricardo Reis (*Fernando Pessoa*)

You call this taking
care of someone? Someone
you love? That's
a crate you're packing
her into. A crate. I don't
care how pretty
the wood is, how
pink the satin, plump the pillow. And then you—

dig a hole
deep in the ground
and place the crate
with her inside
down at the bottom
and pile on
mud and dust and gravel
till the hole is full
and more, until
it makes a mound
pregnant with her still
down there
in the dark.
Forever.

What did she do? I have to know: what
crime did she commit against you?
Fed, and clothed, and washed. Wiped
your mewling mouth, your infant
parts, even to your uttermost asshole
with a tenderness that you
yourself will never equal.
Bibbed, and burped, and cuddled:
loved you—really. Made you live.
That womb was your world.

And this is how
you pay your owing?

Now you say, on further thought,
maybe you'll burn her to an ash.

If you had perished at her breast,
she would have carried you
with hair askew and clothing torn,
blaming God, imploring heaven,
till either you awoke again
or rotted to pieces in her arms,
regardless of the others following
with alien gesticulations, shouting:

“Dead! All gone,
and never will come back!
The one you love
is dead and gone!
Can’t you see that?”

Motherland

It is a thought that grew and grew for years
as sure and slow as cowboys infiltrating west, at first,
and then the pioneers,
who hunted buffalo to eat
and treated with the Indians
and kept on moving, then
the bluecoats, who slaughtered all to make
the plains and rugged mountains
echo, empty as a bullet casing, so
that this slow train might one day chug the rails
all that way back, from west to east, groaning, chuffing smoke
until at last the weary messenger with the walrus mustache
steps down from the Pullman, brushes
off the dust and ash of that long journey, and leans
to whisper what you always should have known:
that by the time she dies, you must
have found, or find among
these pigtails, printed dresses, scabby
knees and elbows, silly gigglers, that one
who will be worthy of so great a treason: one
who'll grow so tall in love—
hard in discipline, sacrifice, and strong of arm enough—
to bury her six feet under
and bring you safely to another home
infinitely west of San Francisco.

Review

Eyeball of the deity, blank
eyeball of the television screen that stares back into the room
where all protective layers—clothing, ozone—peel away;
gigantic suns that, naked, dance
and smear their light erotically and swirl
within the tiniest of pinheads lost within
the tiniest of pinheads, etc.

Primum mobile, unmoving
mover, pederast voyeur, you peeper at a peepshow that you made
and set in motion, mechanical parade
of puppets, wind-up figures, painted tin,
stiff-legged, tormented by geometries, perfections
spoken only, never seen.

Summer numbly follows spring; wave
succeeds to wave; the howls and imprecations of the damned a yellow
buzzing.
What coma case could bear to watch this arbitrary sprawl spin on
for even a single episode, let alone another season?
Simon Cowell turns two thumbs down.
Discriminating viewers change the channel or switch off.

Homage to Shiva

The dark tide reaches out like a tsunami, suddenly
overlaps the sunny villages, even hundreds
of miles inland, with massed waters, irresistible.
You think, "Of course, I'll swim." But it's not like that.
The wave picks up everything: refrigerators, tires, tool sheds,
shattered palms, roof-timbers, dumpsters, cars, and swirls,
grinds you to pieces in the mix and flow before anyone could throw
a rescue rope or reach a hand or foot from an upper story.
The few, the safe, gather on the balconies, watching, just grateful
to escape this time themselves, keeping their fingers crossed the old
colonial hotel won't crumble down on top of them.

I wake from a dream in which my dead friend Joe
wakes from his stonelike trance especially
to send me his apologies for missing the birth of my daughter.
Only I don't have a daughter, and now
I'm too old, never will. Melissa: Melissa would
have been her name, mellifluous and sweet as honey.
Her faceless face, another casualty, floats by below, a yellow
dandelion turned up toward the sun, toward this balcony where I
stand, hypnotized, and watch the flow, the crush and drowning.

The dark tide reaches out, pulls in
all that ever was
and all that ever could have been.

Jai Guru Deva.

54th Birthday

Drifting in and out
of sleep, I'm seven again,
snoozing in the back
of our old Studebaker.
My father, his youth restored,
is at the wheel. I know
I'm safe
and heading home.

Afterglow

for Pete Townshend

Those from whom we came
have passed on, now,
as we are passing in our turn:
ours the generation that urged our claim
to bring a new awareness, and to burn
all bridges to a sordid past—or someone
claimed that for us. Now our flame
gutters, barely bright enough to show
that we were just the same as all the others.
One last look; a rueful shrug, and
off into the dark we go.



About the Author

John Lawson was born in Richmond, VA and holds a B.A. from St. Andrews Presbyterian College, where he studied poetry with Ron Bayes and wrote and performed music with the legendary Phlegmish Collection. He is the proud father of Steven Thomas Lawson, and he currently teaches at Robert Morris University in Pittsburgh.

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Generations

“John Lawson’s poetry urges us to have reverence for the red earth, the green knoll, and the half-myths of our memories. This is poetry that hurts and heals. Lawson takes us into the slippery, uncertain world of domestic love and battlefronts, a land of promise, delusion, regret and trespass. His poetry is especially strong in portraying the desolation of a father speaking to an absent child.”

Joan E. Bauer, poet/co-editor
Only the Sea Keeps: Poetry of the Tsunami

“John Lawson’s *Generations* comes at you with the finesse and bravado of an ace hurler in top form, mixing it up, dazzling batter after batter with the sheer range of his unpredictable arsenal: lyric ploy and play, heartbreaking narrative, the measured music of form - all of it, somehow, with an abiding sense of humor. This is a fine and ambitious first book.”

Joseph R. Bathanti, author
This Metal and Coventry

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